Cultural Exchange and Human Values in Amitav Ghosh’s ‘River of Smoke’: A Study

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The study explores the elements of cultural exchange present in the novel ‘River of Smoke’ by Amitav Ghosh. It also analyses culture in terms of human values. The ‘River of smoke’ is the second novel in the Ibis Trilogy and all the three novels in the series predominantly deal with subaltern history with main characters drawn from three countries. The novel is abundant with the elements of cultural exchange. Ghosh writes on themes like travel, diaspora, history, political struggle, colonialism, culture etc., which move across continents and oceans. The issues related to colonised societies, formation of identities in colonial and post-colonial settings, lost or suppressed history, multiple cultures, and differences are effectively dealt by him in his novels. As per the ‘cultural exchange’ theory, the following areas of the novel must be explored: the connection between geographical area and socio-cultural practices of the people, the role of the mediators or the social agents, the elements of cultural exchange like assimilation, enculturation, etc and cultural traits of the characters. The characters in the novel exhibit certain human values through their social behaviour. The values or the loss of values of the characters due to the changing circumstances are also effectively brought out in the study.

Keywords: Cultural exchange, migration, cultural traits, human values.

INTRODUCTION

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1. CULTURAL EXCHANGE THEORY IN LITERATURE RESEARCH

The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms (2006) defines culture as the cultivation of a body of values. The term ‘culture’ also denotes the totality of customs and institutions of a sect of people. For the field of 'literary criticism' culture is the body of values handed over from the past through imaginative works. Critics like Gramsci and Bourdieu have included migration, diaspora, and globalization in the field of cultural studies (Chides and Fowler 2006). Raymond Williams argues that 'culture' is the outcome of a whole way of life and it should not merely highlight the intellectual, philosophic, and artistic achievements of a society.

Homi Baba (1994) calls culture both transnational and translational. It is transnational in the sense that the postcolonial discourse takes into account the histories of cultural displacement which includes slavery, migration, and the traffic of economic and political slavery. At the same time, culture is translational due to the aspect of how culture signifies or what is signified by culture. Migration, displacement, and diaspora are the dimensions of cultural transformation if it is translational. In such a case, culture's particularity cannot be accessed. However one can understand the construction of culture and invention of tradition.

Experts in the field of cultural studies have defined the concept of cultural exchange in various ways. Some such definitions are discussed below.

Espagne (1998) says cultural exchanges are not limited to objects alone but include ideas, concepts, and behaviour of individuals. The aspects of cultural exchange include both the material and symbolic side of culture. By 'symbolic side of culture,' we mean the ideas, concepts, verbal images, and stereotypes. The material side of culture includes actions, goods, and
people. However, the symbolic side of culture cannot be separated from the material side of culture [14].

Peter Burke (2000) is of the view that the central element of cultural exchange is to find the interrelation between immaterial and material aspects of cultural exchange. He adds that it is important to analyse the degrees of closeness between two or more cultures which range from total rejection to total adaption. Burke further says that the researcher should focus on mediators and the system of which they are part, in which they act and make the cultural transfer possible [14]. In cultural exchange, there is no privilege of one culture over the other.

According to Dirk Hoerder (2002) when peasants enter other countries, they easily accept the cultural changes. He also states that slaves were forced to migrate whereas peasants migrated voluntarily. Cultural exchange can also be considered as a connection between geographical area and socio-cultural practices [9]. Cultural exchange traces various aspects of national spaces but not reducing the analysis to confrontation, comparison, or simple addition. It explores new objects and new perspectives. Cultural exchange cannot be generated without understanding the theory of culture and the phenomena of acculturation. Cultural exchange is not a record of cultural decline whereas it acts as evidence for deliberate change. In addition, the changes in a certain form of culture can be considered as development or progress in civilization.

In cultural exchange, the mediators or the social agents play a vital role and the mediators include people like merchants, artists, scholars, musicians, etc. Even textbooks are considered to be a mediator of cultural exchange [12]. Cultural exchange is a new field of research that includes social, cultural practices, humanities, economic conditions, and political status. It starts from analysing the myths of the country to recent trends in wearing dresses, music and food habits of the people. It also compares multiple cultures and the history of various nations.

In the beginning, it is important to probe the literary texts and language which are the core areas for scrutinising cultural exchange. The next point to be considered is region; the cultural exchange should investigate the space or society which makes cultural exchange possible. The cultural exchange often takes place in different cultural areas which denotes the presence and crossing of borders. The border comprises nations as well as languages. It also extends to the economic border like the transfer of culture from rich to poor. Most of the time cultural transfer is considered a good measure for the change of the society; however, the exchange process has not been implemented peacefully.

Culture is considered a heterogeneous force and it is open to constant changes. To understand cultural exchange it is important to analyse its elements. The various elements of cultural exchange are assimilation, enculturation, acculturation, adaptation, contact zone, cross-culture, cultural diffusion, cultural dissonance. Cultural traits, cultural shock, gender discrimination, religious discrimination, slavery, and transculturation are also forming part of cultural exchange [10]. Though there are many other aspects of cultural exchange, the elements that are best suited for analysing the novel of Amitav Ghosh are taken up for consideration. It is necessary to limit the aspects of cultural exchange since it is a vast field. The novel ‘River of Smoke’ focuses on three major countries namely China, Britain, and India. So the cultural exchanges that happened among these three countries are going to be discussed.

1.2. LITERATURE AS A MEDIUM FOR CONSTRUCTING HUMAN VALUES

Different critics have different perception on combining literature and human values. Some believe that the values of literature are inseparable from the human values and norms; whereas some say that aesthetics and ethics are two different genres and should not be confused. Especially during post structuralism, writers, critics and readers say that literature and human values are two different spheres. However scholars are of the view that promotion of human values in literature helps in presenting practical examples of human behaviour. Wayne C. Booth says “Stories are our major moral teachers”. Lothar Bredella mentions that empathy, sympathy, understanding and recognizing others feelings also come under the values through literature. Through narratives and fiction the readers can put forth ethical and moral inquiries and can also understand the way of human life.

Wayne C. Booth pioneered ‘ethical and rhetorical approach to narrative fiction’ and this approach helps in disseminating the moral implication in narrative technique. The moral values present in the book can be deducted through mode of narrative. The readers can deduct the values through comments made by the author if it is an authorial narration; and the point of view narration makes the readers to decode the values by themselves. Through narrative, the readers can question the actions, behaviour and ethical values of the characters. Bringing together literature and moral values will be a fruitful venture in cultural studies.
2. RIVER OF SMOKE

Amitav Ghosh’s second novel in the Ibis Trilogy series, ‘River of Smoke’ was published in the year 2011. The other two novels are Sea of Poppies (2008) and Flood of Fire (2015). The plot of the novel is the continuation of the first novel ‘Sea of Poppies’. In the first novel, a group of people moved from India to Mauritius for sugar implantation. The major characters in the novel include Deeti, Kalua, Neel, Zachary Reid, Paulette, and Ah-Fatt. But due to a whirlwind, the ship got wreck and the people moved in different directions. The first novel ends with the escape of five men from the ship. The five men were Kalua, Neel, Ah- Fatt, Serang Ali, and Jodu. The second novel ‘River of Smoke’ talks about the plight of the people who escaped from the ship. The novel also introduces new characters like Bahram Modi, Robin Chinnery, and Mr.Fitcher Penrose [5].

Deeti reached Mauritius and she is leading her life with her son. Kalua, Jodu, and Serang Ali had a plan to move to Mergui; whereas Ah- Fatt and Neel decided to move to Singapore and then to Malaca. Paulette was staying in her cousin’s house. Later Ah-Fatt and Neel were made to move to Canton for business purpose (opium sale) along with Ah-Fatt’s father in the ship called Anahita. Paulette was also moving to Canton along with Mr.Fitcher in Redruth ship meant for collecting plants. Thus all the major characters in the novel are moving to different countries and their movements give a lot of possibilities for cultural exchange.

The major plot predominantly portrays the life of Bahram Modi. Bahram Modi reached Canton to sell opium. But due to the prohibition of opium in China, he was not able to complete his business successfully. The second part of the story revolves around two plots. The first plot deals with Bahram Modi and other drug dealers who were writing letters to the Governor and Commissioner of China for allowing opium trade. The second plot deals with Robin Chinnery’s letter to Paulette explaining the experience he had in Canton while collecting Golden Camellia. The characters in the novel reflect the conflicts and tensions arising out of the effort to negotiate between the tradition and the desire to lead a new life. They are torn between the historical past and the uncertain present, between traditional ethos and modern culture when they migrate to other countries. The large-scale setting of the novel and the grand theme offer great potential for cultural research.

3. ELEMENTS OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN ‘RIVER OF SMOKE’

Shashi Taroor rightly identifies the presence of cultural elements in the novel ‘River of Smoke’. He says, ‘The novel celebrates the joys of cultural and culinary mingling, the mongrelisation of language [and] the mixing of peoples across old barriers… a monumental tribute to the pain and glory of an earlier era of globalization’- Shashi Taroor, Washington Post.

The novel ‘River of Smoke’ begins with the life of Bengali woman Deeti at Mauritius. Her acquaintance includes her own family members, some fellow travellers in the ship and some natives of Mauritius. They are moving to the top of a mountain to perform prayer, as part of the Gran Vakans celebration which preceded New Year. This festival was considered as pilgrimage by them. Deeti, as the leader, was carried by a group of younger males and the others followed her. She becomes the leader of her community. A great transformation is found in the character of Deeti now. In the first novel, she was suppressed by men and her family members but now she is able to create an identity for herself. Then the novel slowly presents the flashback of the people who escaped from the Ibis ship. Deeti begins to explain her paintings in her ‘Memory Temple’ to the children. It talks about the life of people who travelled with her in Ibis and moved to various places across Indian Ocean due to storm. Migration caused lot of changes in the life of all these characters.

The group of men escaped from Ibis reached Great Nicobar and all the men were shocked and scared of their survival in the new land. Only Serang Ali and Ah- Fatt were not afraid of Great Nicobar because they were already familiar with the island. After getting money by selling birds’ nests, the men decided to move to different places for which they need a supporting hand. Neel decided to move with Ah- fatt, because he knows places near China and Malaysia. Ah- Fatt said to Neel, ‘You afraid I am going to leave you alone eh Neel? Do not worry. You my friend, no? I can na leave you all lone in this place’ (p- 118). Jodu and Kalua decided to move with Serang Ali because the place Mergui is known to him already.

The next plot of the novel starts when Deeti asks Neel to add the picture to her ‘Memory temple’ and it deals with the life of Bahram Modi, who reaches Canton for opium trade. Bahram Modi plays an important role in the second novel and he becomes a representative of the Indian opium trader in China. Bahram is actually a poor son-in-law of rich traditional family, marries Shireenbai and has two girl children. After coming to Canton for a business purpose, he has an affair with Chi-Mei. Most of the men have second family in the host country and the major reason is that the men are out of their family control and there is
none to question them. According to the Hindu tradition, marriage is a sacrosanct union and the husband is expected to be loyal to the wife. But migration tends to make men forget this age-old value.

On considering migration, women’s chances of moving to other countries are very low when compared to men. Even in this novel, we have lots of men involved in migration such as Neel, Ah-Fatt, Bahram Modi, Robin Chinnery and Fitcher Penrose, and others. Whereas women migrants are very limited that include only Deeti and Paulette. So comparing cultural exchange that occurs based on the gender is limited. But every character irrespective of gender has different reasons for migration, and their adaptation of culture in the new country is based on it. Bahram Modi and Zadig bey involved in migration for economic reason and they are not ready to assimilate every culture followed in host country and at the same time they are very much concerned about their status in their native country. Deeti and Paulette migrated not due to the economic reason but to create an identity for them. These women are able to create a culture to establish their identity in the new land. They do not worry about their status in their home country. Whereas for Ah-Fatt and Neel migrate for the sake of survival.

The accepted behaviour of the members of the society is based on the culture of the place. The suppressed women and marginalized suffer in both pre-colonial and post-colonial period. This leads to cultural subversion i.e. culture may act as a traditional barrier for women and marginalized people in the society. The society put all the restrictions on women but men enjoy the freedom of culture. Most of the men in this novel had two wives, one in their native place and other in business place. Bahram married Shireenbai and also Chi-mei who is a washer woman. Zadig bey, one of the friends of Bahram also marries twice. Mr. Burnham’s wife is just to maintain his house and house workers. The people had the habit of worshipping everything as the symbol of women (goddess); but they are not ready to respect their wives, sisters and other women. The emotions of women were least considered.

Though Zadig bey and Bahram Modi had two wives their way of treating them and considering lives are different. To Bahram Modi, Shireenbai is the symbol of social status and respect, Chi-mei is the symbol of love and so he is not ready to leave any of his wives. Zadig bey on the other hand left his first family completely and gives importance to the second family which needs him. But Bahram Modi is not ready for that because he knows that this may bring economic ruin and social disgrace. Another injustice to women can be found when Mr. Fitcher says to Paulette that European ladies are not permitted inside the city of Canton. The prohibition of European women was in practice- ‘a place where the female presence was strictly forbidden’ (p-52).

Cultural subversion also happens to marginalized people. In India low class people are considered as marginalized and the high class people suppressed them through various means. This suppression happens in local level and also in global level. Indians were suppressed by British and people in many countries suffered economically, politically, physically and mentally.

Canton is not a new place to Modi because he visited the place many times. In this article, the researcher discussed how far Modi could adjust in a new place. But after the death of Chi-Mei, the mistress of Modi, he had nightmares. Modi cannot adopt the place after the death of Chi-Mei, which shows mental transformation is the base reason for all the cultural transformation. Moreover, when he faces a problem in Canton, he immediately remembers his family members. When the ship gets stuck in the storm Modi fears that he is going to die. At that moment, he thinks of the warning given by Shireenbai before he leaves India. The warning is about bad omens she sees after Modi decides to move to Canton. Though Modi neglected the warning at that time, now he is reminded of it instantaneously.

The influence of one country over another either through colonization or through migration results in a kind of cultural exchange. In the novel ‘River of Smoke’ the characters moved to different countries like Canton, Mauritius, Malaysia, and Mergui and adopted the culture of the new land. Moreover, they spread their own culture in the new place. Trade and exploration is the major reason for cultural change. Opium and slave trades are the predominant reasons for the historical transformation, and they laid wounds on the colonized, both physically and mentally. So it is necessary to analyse the benefits and drawbacks of cultural exchange. British, Canton, and India exchange food, religion, dress code, and behavioural pattern.

The major reason behind the exchange of culture in the novel is trade and commerce, especially opium transactions. The novel ‘River of Smoke’ can be analysed in three aspects: movement of people across the Indian Ocean region, opium trade among India, China, and Britain, and exchange of flora and arts among countries. He also talks about multilingual lascar language used by different people in the novel. The novel 'River of Smoke' talks about the plight of the people who do not have any common language to communicate, so most of the people use pidgin dialect for their survival. Bahram Modi was a successful businessman in his opium trade and his business solely depends on China. So he learns to speak the Chinese language. Though he is not a master in that language, he can manage to speak in pidgin language. In the same way, there are many characters like Chi Mei, Neel, and Zadig Bey who learnt the local language for their survival. ‘Parsi, Malay, Chinese and Pidgin- is a rich brew
from cultures re-energised through imperialism and trade’ - The Economist.

The novel presents a ‘globalized workplace’ i.e. in the Ibis ship people from different nations like Britain, America, China, India, and lascars from various nations worked. The novelist also describes the purpose of the voyage of the two ships namely, Anahita and Redruth. Already the purpose of Ibis was explained in the first novel stating that it carried coolies to Mauritius. Anahita is the ship owned by Mr. Bahram Modi, who is the father of Ah- Fatt. This ship was carrying opium from India to China. Mr. Fitcher Penrose was sailing on the ship called Redruth and his purpose was to collect varieties of plants from China. This ship is filled with green plants collected from various parts of the world and was moving to China. ‘Fitcher’s intention was to exchange these American plants for Chinese species that had not yet been introduced to the West’ (p- 77). So, in this novel, these two ships namely Anahita and Redruth act as a source for the transaction of trade and commerce since they carry people of different origins to Canton. These ships carry immigrants from different backgrounds all over the world.

Ghosh in his novel celebrates cultural blending and multiculturalism. Ghosh is considered a global diasporic writer with borderless countries. From this analysis, it is clear that cultural exchange is not merely an exchange of goods or any other material aspects whereas it helps in creating identity for the people[12]. Culture can also influence the psychological aspects of a character. Even in this novel, we can find the characters’ decision is greatly influenced by their culture of home country and host country. The plot proves that migration gives new freedom to a certain group of people but restrict others. Their adaption to the new culture or their hardships to overcome the culture shock shows the impact of cultural exchange on the characters.

4. PROMOTION OF VALUES FROM HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

It is necessary to analyse culture in terms of human values also. Literature and society engage in the dynamic exchange of norms and values. One can trace the presence of human values in literature by considering various points such as, the characters that provide moral values and becomes practical examples of human behaviour. Then the novel makes the reader experience both admirable and corrupted characters by making them depict every character and each incident. By narrating a certain incident, the author can make the readers understand that such kind of issue occurs in society.

The first novel ‘Sea of Poppies’ deals with the cultivation of poppy in India and the second novel ‘River of Smoke’ discusses the sale of opium in China. So in both the novels the readers find that the people suffer because of the British trade of opium. They fail to respect human values and just for the sake of money they made many Chinese people an opium addict. ‘…the foreign merchants are entirely to blame for the present situation: opium has made them so rich they cannot conceive of managing without it; they do not understand that it has become impossible to import it because thousands, may be millions of people here have become slaves to it - monks, generals, housewives, soldiers, mandarins and students. Even more dangerous than the drug, says Charlie, is the corruption that comes with it…’ (p-353). Many changes happened in the world because of opium. It affects the normal life of the people and made them daydreamers. It also makes the people involved in corruption. These incidents denote how opium can corrupt everything in society. The degeneration of the nation which in turn leads to war is because of man's greed.

The businessman from India was not able to sell opium in China after the commissioner of China laid a rule against the sale of opium. But the readers cannot identify who struggles more. Indians due to their heavy loss had to suffer economically, but if opium is allowed then Chinese people's condition will become worse. This made the readers realize the issue present in society before the opium war. ‘Smoking opium, in its first stages, impedes business; and when the practice is continued for any considerable length of time, it throws whole families into ruin, dissipates every kind of property, and destroys man himself’. (p-133)

In the novel ‘River of smoke’, Bahram Modi is the leading character especially in the second half. Bahram Modi knows very well that opium is harmful to his health and is against his religion. But he did that business for the sake of his economic condition. He also began to consume opium. Bahram after consuming opium got frequent nightmares. He began to afraid of ghosts and started to dream about girls. He was not able to differentiate between life and dreams. Thus the good nature of Bahram is spoiled because of opium. Bahram understands that it is not right to involve in the opium business, his need for money makes him do that business. ‘…that lotus cannot blossom unless its roots are planted in the mud. …opium is not important in itself; it is just mud - it is what grows out of that is important’ (p-452). Bahram speaks thus to his friend Zadig, though Bahram feels retorted on Zadig’s comment on his opium business.

The first novel talks about Indians' enslavement and how far they got tormented during British rule. The second novel deals
with the condition of China due to the trade of opium into China by the British. Through reading both novels one can understand the importance of human values. The first novel talks about the lack of freedom in India and the people’s enslavement. The second novel discusses the complete freedom of trade in China which spoils many people’s life. So lack of freedom as well as complete freedom spoils the human values in society.

5. CONCLUSION

The article begins by tracing elements of cultural exchange present in the novel ‘River of Smoke’ written by Amitav Ghosh. The themes and issues of Ghosh’s writings help to explore the limits and possibilities of post-colonialism. His writings constitute the multi-dimensional nature of the post-colonial predicament.

From the foregoing arguments it is evident that the various cultural elements such as assimilation, enculturation, cultural dissonance, cultural shock, etc are powerfully present in the novel. The present study succeeds in applying the cultural exchange theory in ‘River of Smoke’. The characters in the novel seek self-fulfillment from the social context. They, in the process of assimilating alien culture, develop some human values. Such values get strengthened through their culture and the environment. The readers and the researchers can find a visible and live-portrayal of the cultural exchange that is happening among the characters of the novel in different locales. Ghosh’s ‘consciously crafted style’ also adds vigour to the portrayal of culture and values.

REFERENCES